



Amy Sedaris in *Strangers with Candy*

## HOMECOMING QUEEN

### *Strangers with Candy*

review by M. Faust

I don't know that anyone issued a call for a female Jim Carrey, but Amy Sedaris seems determined occupy that niche. As Jerri Blank, the 40ish hardcase at the center of this film adaptation of the Comedy Central series, she sports a set of buckteeth and holds her face in a perpetual grimace that suggests Carrey's Fire Marshall Bill from his *In Living Color* days. Sedaris seems wholly unencumbered by personal vanity: If a laugh can be gotten from her wide hips or pot belly, she's there in skin-tight sweat pants. It's rather a surprise to Google her and find that off screen she's a reasonably attractive woman: If the Oscar people were to institute a Lon Chaney award for Most Uncomfortable Performance, she'd be a lock.

But what seemed funny in small weekly doses on the home screen lands with a thud on the big one. Though it's touted as a prequel to the series, the film of *Strangers With Candy* gives no more backstory than viewers got in the introduction of each episode. For the uninitiated, Jerri is a 46-year-old ex-con who, after years in prison on drug and prostitution charges, returns to her hometown and enrolls in the high school she quit at the age of 15.

The series, devised by Sedaris and fellow Second City alumnae Stephen Colbert and Paul Dinello, wisely didn't take the premise too seriously, using it only as a device to satirize the preachy "After School Specials" made for overly impressionable teens in the 1970s and 1980s. But where a half-hour TV show can exhaust one gag and then reinvent itself next episode, a feature film is with you for three times that length.

Maybe the plot here (Jerri enters the school science fair in order to impress her father) was meant to be fatuously clichéd. But

if that's so, it's hard to tell where the real meat of the movie is supposed to be. There are some funny bits poking fun at teachers who couldn't care less about their students, particularly with Colbert as a history teacher whose ignorance is matched only by his sense of victimization at the hands of the world at large. (As he tells an ex-lover, with no trace of irony, "I need more out of this relationship than I'm willing to put into it.")

There are enough other Second City veterans on hand to allow for at least the possibility of parody, but they get short shrift to make room for a gaggle of celebrity cameos that do nothing but make you say, "Hey, there's Philip Seymour Hoffman!" or "Hey, there's what's-his-name, you know, Sarah Jessica Parker's husband."

But the biggest problem is at the movie's center. Jerri is so grotesque that we're curious about her past. We also expect to see her use the skills of a street criminal to get her through high school. But neither of those things happen. And while Jerri may be both selfish and stupid, she's more innocent than you would expect from a supposed career criminal. No one at school even seems to acknowledge that she's three times as old as the other students: The movie could just as well be about a transfer student for all the difference Jerri's age and history make to the story.

*Strangers with Candy* most resembles a mid-period John Waters movie, like *Polyester* or *Serial Mom*, lacking the bizarre empathy that Divine was able to coax out of us. I would say that it's not nearly as outrageous as it thinks it is, but I can't really believe that even the people who made this think it was outrageous.

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